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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001040

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/PB, USAID, AND IO  
DEPT ALSO FOR OFFICE OF WOMEN'S ISSUES ABOTTNER AND LBLOOM

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KWMN](#) [SOCI](#) [KPAO](#) [EAID](#) [UN](#) [BG](#)  
SUBJECT: WOMEN,S DEVELOPMENT POLICY BEING IMPLEMENTED

REF: DHAKA 00436

Classified By: Ambassador James Moriarty, Reasons 1.4(b),(d)

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) The Government of Bangladesh (GOB) plans to implement its Women's Development Policy quietly, according to the Adviser for the Ministries of Primary and Mass Education, Women and Children Affairs, and Cultural Affairs. Adviser Rasheda K. Chowdhury told the Ambassador on September 30 that the GOB remained committed to the policy but wanted to avoid disruptive protests like the ones that followed the unveiling of the policy earlier this year (reftel). The Adviser also touched on the donor coordination process and reactions to a decision to give the domestic NGO Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) some control over primary education.

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FUTURE OF WOMEN,S POLICY  
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¶2. (C) Chowdhury explained to the Ambassador that the GOB had recently been silent on the Bangladesh National Policy of Advancement of Women to avoid disruptive protests before the upcoming national parliamentary elections slated for December ¶2008. The Chief Adviser had launched the policy on March 8, sparking fierce protests from conservative Muslim groups (reftel). Chowdhury promised, however, that the GOB had incorporated the policy's tenets into its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) and would implement them.

¶3. (C) According to the Adviser, a new Parliament would need to handle two important outstanding women's issues: ratification of the U.N. Convention on the Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (which had stalled due to conflicts between inheritance standards in the Convention and sharia law), and direct elections for designated women's seats in Parliament. (NOTE: The parties currently select members for the reserved seats on a proportional representation basis. END NOTE.) Chowdhury said a misperception that the Women's Development Policy dealt with inheritance rights had caused the protests earlier this year. According to Chowdhury, the only portion of the policy relevant to inheritance was the mention of the CEDAW, which had not been ratified due to the conflicts outlined above.

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DONOR COORDINATION HEADACHES  
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¶4. (C) Chowdhury complained about the cumbersome process for receiving foreign aid that had come out of the Second Primary Education Development Program (PEDP II). (NOTE: PEDP II is an approximately \$1.8 billion program with funds pooled from eight different donors. The USG does not participate in the pooled fund. END NOTE.) She claimed the process created by PEDP II delayed fund disbursements and funding approvals. She expressed frustration that new World Bank-funded textbooks were not reaching often-needy madrassas; Chowdhury said she was considering using GOB money for this project instead. Her complaints focused not on the good intentions of donors but again on the process for disbursing assistance.

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SHAPING EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH  
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¶5. (C) The Ambassador asked about recent criticism of steps to grant NGOs a role in primary education. Chowdhury replied that the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), a renowned domestic NGO that has branches in several developing countries, but recently formed a public-private partnership with the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education to train teachers, raise enrollment rates through social mobilization, and perform surveys of education. The teachers, associations had opposed this, ostensibly because they believed these should be government functions. Chowdhury opined that the teachers and their associations did not want increased monitoring of their work. She said that the politically neutral Caretaker Government did a poor job communicating with the partisan teachers, associations, as it was uncomfortable dealing with these politicized groups.

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¶6. (C) Chowdhury praised the USG-supported Bangladeshi Sesame Street program, Sisimpur, and requested it be distributed more widely on additional television channels and through DVDs. She suggested that BRAC use it in education work. (NOTE: USAID/Bangladesh is already in discussions with BRAC along these lines. END NOTE.)

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COMMENT  
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¶7. (C) Chowdhury has been persistent in her support of the National Women's Policy in the face of vehement protests from a small but vocal segment of the population, including calls for her resignation. She has continued work on the policy's implementation, albeit quietly, given the delicate political balance in the lead-up to the December parliamentary elections. Chowdhury has long been a vocal advocate for improved primary education in Bangladesh. Prior to joining the Caretaker Government in January, Chowdhury ran an education NGO; she said she planned to return to this work on leaving the Caretaker Government after the December elections. Moriarty